

Advice for Wild Rabbits

A mother rabbit, or doe, will never abandon her babies. Only her death or creation of an environment where she cannot get to her babies will deter her from her babies.

"I found a nest of orphaned eyes closed baby rabbits. What do I do?"

If the baby's eyes are still closed, it is under 10 days of age. If the nest is intact, if the babies look fat and plump and are nestled snugly next to each other, if there seems to be no immediate danger to them, then leave them alone! You can check to see if the mother rabbit is coming back to the nest by doing the following: crisscross the nest with strands of dental floss or other thin string. If the string is pushed back out of the way in the morning, then you know that mom has returned to her babies. If, after 24 hours, the string is still in place, then we need to think about emergency care for those babies. Another method is to sprinkle cornstarch, flour, or other unscented powder around the nest. You will see the mother's footprints in the powder in the daylight. Again, you will then know that she has returned to her nest and her babies should be left undisturbed. THIS IS NOT ALWAYS A GUARANTEE – so please check the babies for plump tummies before determining that the mother has not come back.

"How often does the mother feed the babies?"

The mother rabbit feeds her babies most usually under cover of darkness – early in the morning before sunrise and /or after sunset. This is so that a predator cannot easily "see" the mother returning to her nest. She feeds one to two times within 12- hour timeframes. The babies flip over onto their backs and nurse upside down. The mother stands over them – ready to flee the nest at the first hint of a predator. It only takes a minute or so for the babies' stomachs to fill and for the feeding to be complete.

"I have picked up the babies – won't my scent keep the mother away?"

No – the mother will not abandon her babies just because the scent of a human is on them. If you are doubtful, then wash your hands and rub them in the grass and soil around the nest and gently replace the babies, making the nest up as it was before you disturbed it.

"The mother has not returned to the nest – what do we do now?"

Remember – mom stays away from the nest during the day – she does not stay with her babies except to feed, stimulate and clean them. Follow the instructions above regarding the use of dental floss to crisscross the nest. If the mom does not return after 24 hours, or if the nest is destroyed and so forth, then it is time for human intervention.

"How do I know if the babies are old enough to be released?"

The baby rabbits leave the nest at approximately 3-4 weeks of age (sometimes older). If the rabbit is as big as a tennis ball (or fully fills your hand), then it is able to survive in the wild. If it fits within your hand or is obviously tiny and small or injured, then it needs to be re-nested or given to a wildlife rehabilitator as soon as possible. At 3-4 weeks of age, their instincts to survive in the wild are fully intact. They know how to camouflage themselves, what natural foods to eat, and what a predator is and how to behave around it. They automatically know to run away from a predator in a "broken path" pattern thus making it hard for a predator to catch them or freeze in the "you can't see me" position.

"My cat/dog just brought in a baby cottontail. What do I do now?"

A wild rabbit that has been in the mouth of a cat is in great danger. The saliva of a cat actually carries billions of particles of bacteria and enzymes that break down the cellular structure of living tissue. Even if there appears to be no external wound, the sharp pointed teeth of a cat could have easily punctured a vital internal organ. As quickly as is feasible and possible, get the baby to a permitted wildlife rehabilitator. Do not attempt to care for an injured rabbit yourself!! A cottontail that has been brought in by your dog is also in danger, but at least the saliva of a dog is not fatal to a rabbit (or other mammals and avians also!). Please monitor your pets. Keep your cats indoors!! Cats are the killers of millions of species of wildlife each year – songbirds and wild rabbits especially!

"The nest has been torn up, but I am willing to help them..."

After you have spoken to a wildlife rehabilitator and it has been determined that you will be responsible and keep your dog/cat away from the nest for whatever time period is needed, then do the following: Bring the babies inside during the day and keep them as described for transport below (shoe box, heating pad, et al but include a small amount of dried and fresh grass) Return the babies to their nest sometime past 4 o'clock in the afternoon. Bring them back inside the next morning, checking their stomachs to make sure that mom has fed them. Continue this under the direction of a permitted wildlife rehabilitator until they babies are ready for release. This system works quite well for those people who are willing to keep their dog/cat under control until the babies are ready for release. This also works well if you are not sure if the mother is coming back or not. This allows the babies to stay in the nest but out of harm's way during the day and then returned to their nest in the evening.

"The nest has been torn up and the babies have no cover. What do I do?"

If the nest has been destroyed by a person, lawnmower, dog, or anything else, you can actually recreate a nest for the babies a on the original nest site or few feet away from the original nest site. Gather dried grasses and scoop out a similar shallow form in the earth. Replace the dried grasses and bits of rabbit fur (the mother always pulls fur from her chest and abdomen to line the nest for her babies). Rub your hands in the grass and soil around the nest and gently replace the babies. If the nest of babies is in imminent danger, then follow the instructions below.

Please follow the instructions below ONLY IF:

- The nest cannot be reestablished
- The babies are in imminent life-threatening danger
- There is no sign of the mother (at least over 24 to 48 hours) or
- The babies are injured

If any of the above stated situations fits your particular scenario, then contact a [state permitted wildlife rehabilitator](#) as soon as possible. If the baby rabbits are determined to have been abandoned and you need to transport them to a rehabilitator, please do the following:

- Use a small container such as a shoebox. Punch air holes in the lid.
- Line the shoebox with a clean soft cloth that you do not mind giving up.
- Place the babies inside the shoebox and put a rubber band around the box and lid, securing it for the ride.
- Babies must stay warm (a rabbit's body temperature is usually 101 degrees Fahrenheit). Fill a clean tube sock with uncooked white rice and tie off towards the top of the sock with a piece of

string. Place the sock into a microwave and heat for less than a minute. Place the sock inside the shoebox and put a washcloth or other piece of clean cloth over the sock. You don't want the sock to be so hot that it could burn the babies. The babies will crawl next to the warmth of the sock and stay there for the ride to the rehabilitator. Another option is to put a wet washcloth (wrung out) into a ziplock baggie and microwave until warm but not hot. This acts as a portable heating pad.

If it is going to be a length of time before you can get the babies to a rehabilitator, please do the following:

DO NOT ATTEMPT TO FEED THE BABIES – TO DO SO COULD CAUSE THEIR DEATH!

Follow the instructions above as per the shoebox or other small container. If you have a heating pad, set it on low and place the pad on a non-conductive surface (your bathroom counter or washing machine lid will do just fine). Place the container with the babies half-on and half-off the heating pad. This will allow the babies to move away from the heat if they need to.

Rabbits require a specialized formula that is high in fat. Alone, most replacement formulas are not sufficient in ingredients to sustain a growing baby rabbit. A rehabilitator has been trained to offer the formula appropriate for this species and knows the correct feeding schedule and protocol of rehydration. You also run the risk of aspirating the baby by using an incorrect feeding utensil (such as a baby bottle with nipple). Mom rabbit also stimulates the babies after feeding in order to help them eliminate. This process is vital to their health and life. Baby rabbits are incredibly fragile and do not take handling by humans well. They will die of stress if handled improperly. Keep baby rabbits away from children, household noise (such as vacuum cleaner and so forth), domestic pets and bright light.

WILD RABBITS DO NOT MAKE GOOD PETS. They are wild things and have wild instincts. They do not trust humans and do not accept other domestic animals as companions. Please do not consider keeping these incredible and fragile creatures as a pet – to keep a cottontail in a cage for the rest of its life is to doom it to a life of sadness and broken spirit.

For further information, please contact the [D/FW Wildlife Coalition](#) or a [state-permitted wildlife rehabilitator](#).